



News Release

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Birth defect investigation reinforces need for folic acid vitamins

Prenatal vitamins covered by state's Apple Health, Medicaid health insurance program

OLYMPIA — An investigation into increased rates of anencephaly – a rare, fatal birth defect – in three Central Washington counties, has state health officials urging all women of child bearing age to take folic acid daily to lower the risk of brain and spinal cord birth defects, including anencephaly. The state offers free prescription coverage of prenatal vitamins for women of childbearing age covered by the state's Apple Health, Medicaid health insurance program.

An investigation by the Department of Health identified 42 pregnancies impacted by anencephaly since 2010 in three central WA counties – Yakima, Benton, and Franklin, equaling a rate of about 8 cases per 10,000 births. This area's rate is higher than the national average of about two cases per 10,000 births.

Anencephaly is a rare neural tube birth defect in which a baby's brain and skull don't fully form in the first month of pregnancy. Babies with anencephaly die soon after they're born. The causes of anencephaly aren't fully understood, but the risk of this tragic defect can be reduced by taking vitamins containing folic acid at least one month before becoming pregnant. Many women aren't aware they're pregnant until after initial brain and spinal cord formation in the developing baby, therefore all women of childbearing age should take folic acid every day.

This week the Food and Drug Administration approved fortification of corn masa flour with folic acid to address the need for this vitamin. Each year, across the country, the addition of folic acid to corn masa flour is predicted to prevent about 40 Hispanic babies being born with a brain or spinal cord defect.

To make it easier for women to get sufficient folic acid, Washington's Health Care Authority covers prenatal vitamins for women from the ages of 11-49 covered by Washington's Apple Health Medicaid program. Women of financial need who do not qualify for Apple Health coverage in Yakima, Benton, and Franklin counties – where the rates of anencephaly are higher – may be able to get free prenatal vitamins through their county's public health department thanks to a grant from Vitamin Angels.

Women who live in Yakima, Benton, and Franklin counties who do not qualify for Apple Health can contact their local health department for information about free prenatal vitamins: Yakima Public Health, 509-249-6541, Benton Franklin Health District at 509-460-4200 (Kennewick), and 509-547-9737 (Pasco). Women of childbearing age who have Apple Health coverage can ask their provider for a prescription for free prenatal vitamins. Prenatal vitamins, multivitamins with folic acid, and folic acid supplements are also available without a prescription at pharmacies throughout the state.

In addition to taking prenatal vitamins before pregnancy, women should go to a health care provider when planning a pregnancy, during the first trimester, and throughout the pregnancy.

Information on [women's health](#) and the agency's [anencephaly investigation](#) is available on [Department of Health's website](#). More information is also available on the [CDC Birth Defects website](#).

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